

# *Is this Normal?*

## *Understanding Adolescent Development*

Dr. Sarah Arnold, Psy.D.  
Licensed Psychologist  
www.dollandassociates.com

**Point to Remember :** *Every child develops at a different pace!*

### **I. Cognitive Development**

- Cognitive development paves the way for autonomy as adolescents become able to solve problems and make decisions more effectively.

#### **Changes in Thinking**

- ❖ Increased self-consciousness and self-focusing
- ❖ Imaginary Audience:
  - “Everyone’s attention is on me”
- ❖ Personal Fable:
  - “No one can possibly understand what I’m going through”
- ❖ More sensitive to criticism.
- ❖ Thinking more abstractly.
- ❖ Process of forming their moral code (but remember, they’ve had the groundwork laid in the past 10+ years from you.)
- ❖ If they previously were willing to conform to please parents, they may suddenly begin asserting themselves and their opinions. They may also begin rebelling against parental control.

#### **Separating from parents: Developing autonomy**

- Process of “De-idealizing” parents
- Stating separateness:
  - “I’m not like you, Dad.”
  - “I don’t agree with you.”
  - “I can’t even believe I’m related to you.”
  - Stating the faults of parents.
  - Dressing in unusual way.
  - Adopting a unique haircut.
  - Not wanting to be hugged or kissed by parents, especially in front of people.
- Tend to conform to peers in clothing, grooming, music, and social activities with more conformity early in adolescence
  - Clothing and appearance becoming more important
  - Wanting to be more independent from parents. They show they are different from adults by adopting different styles and likes (This is the reason music and clothing styles keep changing with the times. Just as adults catch up, kids show their independence with the new trend!)
  - They are trying on new looks and identities as they become aware of who they are and how they are the same or different from peers, parents, and role models.

**Butting Heads**

- Arguments are result of changes in cognitive development.
- Remember:
  - “You don’t get it.” (because “no one understands me.”)
  - Also:
    - “If I don’t argue points with you, how will I ever understand what you believe and value and why?”
  - “Yes, it would be simpler to just ask why I can’t go to an overnight with boys and girls present, but if I argue with you, you’ll strongly get your point across and I’ll hear it and then by the time I’m done with adolescence, I’ll know what you believe. Remember, I’m still trying to understand the world for myself.”
- “So arguing with you is a way I’m learning about your beliefs and your reasoning.”

**II. Puberty**

	Boys	Girls
Growth Spurt	• Starts age 12-1/2	• Starts age 10
Proportions	• Shoulders broaden • Longer legs	• Hips broaden
Muscle-Fat Makeup	• Gain more muscle	• Gain more fat

**Factors in Reactions to Timing of Puberty**

- Physical attractiveness – body image
  - Girls: most want to be thinner, smaller
  - Boys: most want to be bigger
    - Difficult with images and messages they view in popular media
- Fitting in with peers
  - ❖ Prefer similar level of physical maturity

**Gender Differences in the Timing of Puberty**

	Girls	Boys
Early Maturing	Often more unsure of selves & self conscious  More struggles with body image	Tend to be more confident and more independent  Tend to have a positive body image
Late Maturing	Tend to be sociable, lively, and school leaders.  Tend to have a positive body image	More often anxious, talkative, & attention-seeking  More struggles with body image

### ***III. Hormones & Mood Swings***

- ☺ Hormones not only prompt pubertal physical changes, but also emotional changes.
- ☹ However, adolescents are also experiencing more challenging life events than they did when they were younger.
  - ☺ Add the above two + cognitive changes = stronger responses to situations & mood swings.
  - ☹ Emotional ups & downs are normal (and typically related to daily events. What may seem like a minor issue to you, may be catastrophic to your adolescent!)
  - ☺ Therefore, expect some mood changes in your typically sunny child. And as a result, expect some conflict in your typically compliant child.

### ***IV. Self-Esteem***

- Despite popular belief, self-esteem often rises in adolescence and kids find their niche in the world. They find themselves more mature and capable.
- Increased self-esteem is associated with involvement and investment in some extracurricular activity.
- Positive self-esteem also associated with supportive and encouraging parental relationships.
- Chronic, negative friendships, poor academic performance, and highly dissatisfied parental relationships associated with lower self-esteem.

### ***V. What's a parent to do?***

- Accept that it is alright for them to get mad.
- Don't minimize their feelings, but instead listen respectfully & acknowledge genuine concern.
- If they feel judged, they are less likely to talk.
- Provide ideas for coping with feelings positively and praise their efforts when you see them coping positively.
- However, if drastic mood changes are occurring and affecting your child's family life, school grades or behavior, and/or friendships, consider having an evaluation.
  - ❖ E.g. Extreme weight gain or loss, sleep problems, rapid, drastic changes in personality, sudden change in friends, skipping school, falling grades, mention of suicide, signs of substance use, run-ins with the law.

### ***Parent-Child Relationships During Adolescence***

- ❖ Expect some rise in conflict
- ❖ Most conflict is mild
- ❖ Psychological distancing
- ❖ They're learning your beliefs through arguing
- ❖ Positive relationships are associated with
  - Authoritative parenting: Warm, encouraging, & supportive parents who continue to be consistent in limit setting
- ❖ Parenting that is critical and insulting is associated with children who feel unstable and experience low self-esteem.
- ❖ Remember, the relationship still needs affection and support

*Copyright © 2008, Doll & Associates, S.C. ♦ Permission is granted to copy and reproduce this material for educational purposes only. Author's name must be cited, and Doll & Associates web address must be listed. [www.dollandassociates.com](http://www.dollandassociates.com)*